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ABSTRACT

A study examined the attitudes of legislators toward issues facing the Commonwealth of Kentucky, to determine (1) if there were differences in legislators' perception of the usefulness of mass media and interpersonal sources for information, (2) if there was a greater evidence of mass media usage among legislators who can be considered opinion leaders, (3) if legislators held strong opinions about the existence of bias in their sources, (4) if legislators displayed any particular leadership styles, and (5) if legislators perceived the energy concerns of their constituents. Subjects, 84 members of the Kentucky State Legislature, answered a six-page questionnaire designed to obtain responses to the research questions. Results indicated a very important role for interpersonal information sources such as lobbyists, legislative colleagues, constituents, and the Legislative Research Committee (LRC). Findings also indicated that there are some perceptual differences among legislators regarding the usefulness and bias of information sources. Those who become "opinion leaders" are less, rather than more, likely to use mass media sources for decision making. Results also suggested that legislators appear not to prefer all mass media sources or all interpersonal sources, but to judge each source on its own merit and lack of bias. With regard to leadership or management styles, party-adhering types appeared to be a common phenomenon. Finally, legislators ranked energy as being of less concern to their constituents than seven other issues. (References and four tables of data are appended.) (NKA)

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THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA AND INTERPERSONAL SOURCES IN THE FORMULATION OF LEGISLATIVE POLICY

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There are many sources of information that influence policy formation in national, state and legislative bodies. However, our understanding of the relative mix and the hierarchy of various information channels influencing public policy formation and the attitudes of legislators is at best sketchy. Information on policy issues come to legislators from a variety of interpersonal sources including lobbyists, fellow legislators, party leaders, constituents, and others. In addition, information about issues and problems come from a variety of other sources including the news media, public opinion polls and trade journals.

One important question that intrigues social scientists and other observers of the legislative process is how are the voluminous amounts of information, derived from the myriad of sources, used or discarded by legislators as they and their staffs attempt to construct positions on issues. Insight into the process by which one engages in personal gatekeeping, editing and synthesis would be expected to provide a greater understanding of the relationship between mass media influence and legislative policy.

The focus of the present study is the nature of a legislator's reliance on interpersonal and mass media sources in the acquisition of information and the formulation of attitudes and beliefs on energy-related issues. Specifically, the research sought to determine the patterns of information seeking among state legislators, the information sources which most influence them, their relations with constituents, and their leadership style.

Interpersonal Sources

A legislator, like the rest of us, is a member of a number of peer groups. Group membership has been demonstrated as a significant variable in attitude research as people tend to hold opinions similar to others in their group and are influenced by "group norms" in the public display of attitudes and beliefs (Sherif, 1956; Asch, 1956; March and Simon, 1958).

In a variation of that theme Hennessy (1981) argued that: "We shape our opinion in some political and or quasi political matters on the basis of what we think our group friends views are," and noted that the pressure to conform will be greater, instead of less, in social and political groups and issues than in other matters, whether or not group norms are known

or presumed.

Panning (1983) studied the influence of legislative colleagues as well as party influence and concluded that: "The total influence of information acquired from rank and file party colleagues typically exceeds the combined influence of information from constitutents and from expert informants on the committee reporting the bill." He also found that newly elected members of Congress tended to have more effect on policy change than senior members. That is, new members who are not yet incorporated into the inter-legislative network were less influenced by their colleagues.

In the legislative process, influence attempts are often exchanges between two groups--authorities and potential partisans (Gamson, 1968). Sometimes legislators are the authorities (those who have the power to make binding decisions); at other times they more closely resemble the potential partisan (those who are attempting to influence the authorities). This perspective helps illustrate how in some circumstances lobbyists will be opinion leaders for legislators, while in others, legislators will be opinion leaders for their constituents.

Pierce and Lovrich (1979) examined the role of water-policy legislation in Idaho and found that legislators rated information received from interest-groups as being more trustworthy than did the general public. However, legislators trusted information received from colleagues and government bureaucrats more than that received from the interest-groups. Ray (1982) surveyed members of three state legislatures to determine various sources of voting cues. Results indicated that fellow legislators and interest groups were consistently mentioned as important sources of voting cues, while personal reading and the executive branch of the state government were rated unimportant as sources of voting cues. Robinson (1976) argued that, "When interpersonal sources and mass media sources are compared, or are in conflict, interpersonal sources wield greater influence," (in Hennessy, p. 208).

Mass Media

Studies of the uses and the influence of the print media among legislators have generally shown the link to be informal and the influences to be minimal. For example, Lambeth

(1978) asked members of the United States Congress to rate the level of perceived influence which each of eight sources of influence had on their decisions on energy issues. The press was ranked lowest.

In a study of Oregon legislators, Lemert (1975) found that they considered personal contacts with their constituents as more reliable indicators of their constituents' views on issues than they did reports found in the print media. In a similar vein, Hesse (1976), in a study of Wisconsin state senators, found that those senators who relied heavily on the media for indications of their constituents' views were not as likely to be re-elected as were those whose congressional styles involved more personal contact. On the other hand, Rogers and Shoemaker (1971) examined characteristics of opinion leaders and found among other things, opinion leaders were more likely to be oriented beyond their communities and that they had greater mass media exposure.

Bybee and Comdena (1984) found that newspapers were the most frequently used mass media choice of Indiana state legislators followed in preference by radio and television. However, the legislators preferred information from interpersonal sources when confronted by situational demands, i.e., in forming policies, whereas their newspaper use formed a stable pattern, regardless of policy-related information needs. The authors explained the preference for radio over television as being due to a legislator's ability to receive more information from outlying districts over the radio.

Legislative Style

Legislators, like the rest of us, filter and edit incoming information in order to provide support for existing attitudes and beliefs. Moreover, each person adopts a personal mode for conducting him/her self while in office. That mode can be called a legislative style.

An examination of legislative voting reveals two salient models. The first suggests that a legislator's ideology is a major determinant of his or her voting patterns, which is separate from the characteristics of his or her constituents (Kau and Rubin, 1969). The second model posits that politicians reflect the opinions and economic interests of their constituents and constituencies. Thus, the extent to which the legislator turns to his or her

constituents for voting cues is a factor in determining legislative style. Policy agreement should be higher in homogeneous than in heterogeneous districts (Kuklinski, 1979). Other studies have indicated that the influence of the district opinion on an issue affects the salience of the issue as perceived by the legislator (Welch, 1982), and that congressmen respond to sections of their constituencies (Kuklinski and McCoron, 1980).

Present Study

To place the attitudes of legislators towards issues facing the Commonwealth of Kentucky, especially the issue of energy, several questions were raised regarding sources of information and influence. Specifically, the research attempted to determine:

1. Are there differences in the legislator's perception of the usefulness of mass media and interpersonal sources in informing them about energy-related issues?
2. Is there a greater evidence of mass media usage among legislators who can be considered opinion leaders?
3. Do the legislators hold strong opinions about the existence of bias in their mass media and interpersonal sources? Do they respond similarly to categories of information sources? And if so, do they respond similarly to all mass media sources or all interpersonal sources?
4. Do the legislators display any particular leadership styles? That is, are they peer oriented, constituent oriented, party oriented or just "go along with others" type?
5. Do legislators perceive the energy concerns of their constituents?

The topic of energy was chosen since it is of vital importance to the economic viability of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, and would therefore be a salient topic to legislators.

Methodology

Data were collected from 84 members of the Kentucky State Legislature by means of a mail survey. Questionnaires were mailed to 138 legislators over a fifteen day period during the Spring of 1985. The research team was briefed by a member of the non-partisan

Legislative Research Committee on the issues facing the legislators on the floor of the Senate. Also, one of the team members went to the state capital soliciting support for the study. After two mailings a total of 84 useable questionnaires was obtained making the effective response rate 60.8%

The six-page questionnaire employed in the study consisted of a variety of questions aimed at obtaining responses to the questions posed earlier. Only a few open-ended questions were used, the others being closed-ended Likert-scale items. A number of demographic questions were also asked in order to study the response patterns among the regions of Kentucky as well as years of experience in the legislature.

The Likert-scale items consisted of a statement, followed by response categories ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"; "none" to a "great extent"; and "unbiased" to "very biased".

Due to the predominantly nominal and ordinal characteristics of the data, descriptive data analysis techniques were used such as frequencies and cross-tabulations analysed by chi-square statistics. Also, principal components factor analysis with orthogonal rotation, and common factor analysis with orthogonal and oblique rotation was used on questions measuring the usefulness and perceived bias of the sources of information.

Approximately 95% of the legislators responding to the survey were male, with close to three-quarters (72%) being members of the House. The remaining were Senate members. In terms of the number of years served in the legislature, 43% reported less than seven years in the legislature; 38% had between seven and fourteen years of membership; and 19% had between fourteen and twenty four years of experience.

A little over 16% of the respondents came from the Western region of Kentucky (Region I); 19% from Middle Kentucky (Region II); 13% from Eastern Kentucky (Region III); and 43% from Northern Kentucky (Region IV).

Results

Analysis of perceptions of the usefulness of newspapers as sources of information on energy-related issues reveals that the Louisville Courier Journal was rated higher than all other newspapers. Overall, newpapers were rated as moderately useful sources of information, and network and local television nightly news were rated as more useful than print media. (See Table One)

An analysis of interpersonal sources revealed that almost three-quarters of the legislators (74%) say they find lobbyists useful as a source; about 85% find their colleagues useful; while 76% rate their constituents as useful sources of information on energy issues. An overall analysis of source usefulness reveals that interpersonal sources are generally perceived to be more useful than mass media sources (Table One).

Regarding the legislator's use of the print media, more than two-thirds of the legislators report reading national newspapers infrequently. Only 2.2% read the New York Times more than twice a week; 26.5% read the Wall Street Journal three or more times a week and 22.7% read USA Today more than twice a week. Their readership of national newsmagazines is also somewhat limited in that 33% report reading Time weekly or nearly every week;

34.6% for Newsweek 23.6% for US News and World Report. Trade journals seem to be somewhat useful (48%) to legislators, suggesting written information provided by energy companies and lobbyists as influential sources in decision making by legislators.

The Legislative Research Committee (LRC), the non-partisan state body which supplies the legislators with pertinent information on issues, was also ranked among sources they find most useful. Open-ended questions seeking legislators' valuable sources on energy issues also found the LRC mentioned most frequently.

It is particularly important to note the importance of the LRC in light of the fact that state legislators do not have the extensive staffs available to national legislative representatives. One might expect that each legislator would be more likely to rely on an interpersonal source especially if it were perceived to be relatively objective. Similarly, since state legislators are not insulated by their assistants from the information acquisition stage of policy, one might expect that individual mass media would make a greater impact on state legislators than on U.S. congressmen and U.S. senators.

Using principal components factor analysis, a three factor solution was devised for the source usefulness questions. This solution explained 52% of the variance. See Table Two for the factors and their loadings.

The frequency data reported earlier helped in the interpretation of the factors. Factor 1 explained 24 percent of the variance and was made up of two of the most useful and frequently encountered information sources-- lobbyists and colleagues. Factor 2 explained approximately 14 percent of the variance and represented the most useful mass media sources including the Louisville Courier-Journal, local nightly news, and network nightly news. Factor 3 explained almost 13 percent of the variance and included the least useful information sources--someone from the governor's office and trade journals.

Questioned about the degree of bias they attribute in their sources of information, the legislators rated interpersonal sources as being more biased than mass media sources. Ninety-two percent (92%) said Lobbyists were biased, followed by 68% for legislative colleagues, and 65% for constituents. Among mass media sources, the two leading newspapers in the state, the Herald-Leader, and Courier Journal, were perceived to be more biased than more local newspapers and broadcast sources. The local nightly news on the other hand was felt to be biased by only a quarter of the respondents (See Table Two).

Factor analysis of source bias produced a two-factor solution which accounted for 81% of the variance. Factor One--mass media composed of highest loadings for television news and newspapers. For Factor Two, party leaders, the governor's office staff, colleagues, lobbyists, and trade journals accounted for the items. Factor One appears to be those sources generally perceived as being least biased, all of the mass media sources; Factor Two was composed of the most biased sources, mainly interpersonal sources (See Table Three).

In another question, legislators were asked to rate how important nine key issues were to the State as a whole and to their constituents. Legislators ranked energy as being of less concern to their constituents than seven other issues. The energy category was further broken down in order to determine which of four issues legislators thought their constituents were most interested in. Interestingly, developing alternative energy resources

seems to be very much in the interests of constituents (See Table Three).

Legislators were also asked to respond to seven questions designed to tap their personal legislative styles (Table 5a). Two techniques were used to examine the results; one involved an intuitive process. Table Four gives an account of the categorization scheme.

Cross-tabulations were done between operating styles and bias towards mass media and interpersonal sources. A relationship between legislative style and interpersonal sources emerged (x^2=18.7, DF=6, p=.006). Constituent-oriented individuals relied more on interpersonal sources for useful information than any other type. Such legislators also rate the usefulness of constituents higher than any other type (x^2=18.9, DF=9, p=.02). This type also relies more heavily on public opinion polls than any other type (x^2=18, DF=9, p=.03). Surprisingly, this type of person also rated the usefulness of party leaders more highly than any other types (x^2=15, DF=9, p=.09).

Cross-tabulating style with source bias revealed that manager 4 type,the "Waffler", thought constituents were less biased than any other types (x^2=27, DF=12, p=.0066). Peer-oriented manager type rated LRC as being more biased than any other manager type (x^2=18.2, DF=9, p=.03).

A legislator's length of service was broken down into three types called Exp 1 with less than seven years experience; Exp 2 between 7-14 years; and Exp 3 with over 14 years of experience. A statistically significant difference emerged in the perception of the usefulness of party leaders as a source of information among legislators with differing years of experience (x^2=15.7, DF=6, p=.01). Cross-tabulating experience with source bias reveals that Exp 1 and Exp 2 types perceive interpersonal sources as being more biased than Exp 3 type (x^2=8.7, DF=4, p=.07). Network nightly news was the only mass medium source perceived as being biased by different legislator types. The majority of legislators under Exp 3 (followed closely by those in Exp 1) rated network nightly news as biased (x^2=17.9, DF=8, p=.02), along with daily newspapers (x^2=17, DF=8, p=.05).

Cross-tabulating geographic regions with sources of information yielded no significant results, except in the case of network nightly news with legislators from western Kentucky rating it more useful than their middle Kentucky counterparts. (x^2=24.6, DF=12, p=.01). The legislators from northern Kentucky (Region IV) perceive their constituents to be much more concerned about energy issues than any other regions (x^2=29.8,DF=16, p=.01). However, those from the northern region were least concerned with energy production than their western and eastern counterparts (x^2=29.8, DF=16, p=.02). Collapsing the four regions into a rural/urban dichotomy revealed that representatives from urban bases found information received via network nightly news of less use than did their agricultural-based colleagues (x^2=9.5, DF=3, p=.05). This turned out to be the only significant difference between rural and urban legislators.

Conclusions and Discussion

The results of the study seem to provide a succinct answer to the question regarding the utility of information sources. The impact of newspapers and magazines on the Kentucky legislators can be thought of as , at most, very moderate. It is interesting, however, to note

that among newspapers, the hometown newspapers appear to have an edge on credibility and usefulness when compared to the two state newspapers.

The results indicate a very important role for interpersonal information sources like lobbyists, legislative colleagues, consituents, and LRC. The LRC was mentioned repeatedly as a trusted information source. The credibility of the LRC is indeed high among the legislators. The influence of lobbyists as a source of information and influence also seems to be strong. This could be partly due to the fact as Ziegler (1974) notes: "State legislators do not have staff assistants, and tend to rely upon lobbyists more than any other service (source)".

The results also indicate that in response to our first research question, there are some differences in perception among legislators regarding the usefulness and bias of information sources. Legislators with the most experience are less likely to attribute bias in all sources than legislators with low or medium levels of experience. The data also indicate that as experience increases, there is more interpersonal contact than mass media contact. Thus, in response to the second research question, it can be said that there is no evidence to suggest that those who become "opinion leaders" due to their extended tenure as a legislator are more likely to use mass media sources for decision making; in fact, the opposite seems true.

The results also indicate that legislators appear not to prefer all mass media sources or all interpersonal sources, but judge each source on its own merit and lack of bias. For example, the preference for interpersonal sources is not across-the-board, since legislators found information received from party leaders and the governor's office not at all useful. The results of the factor analysis procedure on source usefulness confirms this conclusion.

Our study reinforces conclusions found in previous research (Lambeth, 1978) in which the press was ranked the lowest in terms of influence. The Kentucky state legislators also show a general lack of utilization of the myriad of information sources available for increasing their knowledge about issues facing the state.

With regard to management style of legislators, it is interesting to see that party-adhering types seem to be a common phenomonon. This would suggest that in spite of the assertions legislators make about functioning in the constituent's interest and of being strongly influenced by constituents, they are more likely to stick to party policies, irrespective of the appropriateness of the legislation for their own constituents. This has implications for the concept of legislative style models posited in the introduction. Neither of the models discussed can be either supported or dismissed as inappropriate on the basis of these data.

A final question is, why is there a regional effect on the legislator's perception of mass media utility and bias? Legislators from the more metropolitan areas of the state found local nightly news more biased, whereas legislators from the rural areas valued the information from daily newspapers more. Also, network nightly news was perceived as more useful by agriculturally-based legislators than by their more urban counterparts. Perhaps these findings are a function of the number of competing mass media sources the legislator has available.

As an exploratory investigation of legislators' sources of influence, this study was useful in identifying some of the perceptions they hold about mass media and other interpersonal sources. A cross-comparative study of legislators from different state legislatures could be a next possible step. Future research could also be done to see the perceptions of legislators on similarly raised questions at the Federal level, where staff assistants would also be studied in conjunction with the legislators themselves.

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TABLE ONE

LEGISLATOR'S PERCEIVED USEFULNESS OF SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Source	N	Percent Saying Source is Useful or Very Useful
Mass Media:		
Louisville Courier Journal	77	45%
Lexington Herald- Leader	83	67%
Local/Hometown Newspaper	58	61%
National Television News	80	69%
Local Television News	78	79%
Interpersonal:		
Lobbyists	83	74%
Colleagues	83	85%
Constituents	83	76%
LRC	83	97%
Others:		
Trade Journals	82	48%
Public Opinion Polls	82	40%
Others (Staff)	80	70%

Source Usefulness: Factor Loadings

Source:	I	II	III
Colleagues	.89		
Lobbyists	.71		
Local Nightly News		.78	
Network Nightly News		.77	
Courier Journal		.67	
Governor's Office Staff			.75
Trade Journals			.68
Other Dailies			
Constituents			
LRC			
Party Leaders			
% of Variance Explained by Factor	24.26	14.80	12.97
Cumulative Variance Explained	24.26	39.06	52.04

TABLE TWO

Legislator's Perceptions of Bias in Sources of Information
(where 5=very unbiased and 1=very biased)

MASS MEDIA SOURCE	BIAS MEAN SCORE
Lexington-Herald Leader	2.64a
Louisville Courier-Journal	2.75a
Local Hometown Newspaper	2.90a
TV News-National	2.96a
TV News-Local	3.42b
INTERPERSONAL SOURCE	
Lobbyists	1.59a
Colleagues	2.58b
Constituents	2.32b
LRC	4.14c
OTHER SOURCE	
Trade Journals	1.93a
P.O. Polls	2.93b
Others (Staff)	2.44b

*Mean scores with different subscripts (within categories) are significantly different from each other at the .05 level of confidence.

Source Bias: Factor Loadings

Source	Factor I	Factor II
Network Nightly News	.89	
Local Nightly News	.68	
Other Dailies	.62	
Courier Journal		
Party Leaders		.78
Governor's Office Staff		.69
Colleagues		.61
Lobbysists		
Trade Journals		
Constituents		
LRC		
% of Variance Explained by Factor	41.66	39.53
Total Variance Explained	41.66	81.20

TABLE THREE

IMPORTANCE OF ISSUES AS PERCEIVED BY THE LEGISLATORS
(% Saying Important or Very Important)

Issues	N	Constituents	Kentuckians
Agriculture	79	55.7	83.5
Education	84	79.4	90.4
Road & Transport	82	70.6	80.1
Energy	73	31.9	52.0
Taxation	80	60.0	67.4
Development	72	40.2	58.2
Health Care	77	43.1	50.5
Housing	72	22.5	29.0
Jobs	83	82.6	79.2

PERCEPTIONS OF CONSTITUENT CONCERNS
ON ENERGY ISSUES
(% Saying Important or Very Important)

Issue:	Percent:
Energy Production	51.8
Taxation on Energy Corporation	52.5
Development of Alternate Resources	57.1
Regulation of Energy Corporation	76.3

TABLE FOUR

Frequency of Agreement and Disagreement
to legislative Style Questions

Question	% Agreeing Somewhat or Strongly	% Disagreeing Somewhat or Strongly
1. I make up my mind on an energy issue based upon what I think is in the best interests of my constituents, regardless of what the media, opinion polls or even my constituents say.	64.0	29.0
2. I try to cooperate with other legislators for the betterment of the state, but the interests of my constituents have to come first.	83.0	12.0
3. I am Likely to go along with party leaders' suggestions.	35.0	50.0
4. I make up my mind on an energy issue based upon what I think my constituents want, regardless of whether that is in their interest.	24.0	69.0
5. I am likely to introduce legislation and actively work for its passage.	81.0	6.0
6. I am perceived as a leader by my colleagues in the legislature.	58.0	14.0
7. I am in the legislature to work for the betterment of the state, even if that means the interests of my constituents may have to take a back seat upon occasion.	63.0	26.0